

A brief history of the Red Menace

A summary of the The Red Menace newsletter, published in London from 1989-1990 by a group of individuals as a contribution to the movement for a stateless, moneyless and classless world human community – communism.

The Red Menace (TRM) was a newsletter published in London from 1989 to 1990, with articles on social struggles and other political developments from a communist perspective (1).

Those involved in TRM were clear that communism had nothing to do with the bureaucratic capitalist dictatorships then on their last legs in Eastern Europe:

"Communism has got nothing to do with state control of the economy (as Leninists suggest) nor for that matter with workers owning their own factories and exchanging products with other workers (as advocated by some anarchists). Communism... is the abolition of all forms of the state, exchange (buying and selling) and property – including 'collective property'. In short it is a moneyless, classless, stateless world community" (2)

"We are for the destruction of the money/wages system and its replacement by a classless human community where alienation, the subjugation of women and nationalism have been abolished forever" (3)

Central to this conception of communism was the notion that that "The Revolution is not a Party Affair": "We do not accept that the communist movement revolves around the pivot of a single organisation. We believe that it is the organic product of the proletariat in struggle" (4).

The understanding of communism informing TRM drew on a number of sources, including:

- the anti-Bolshevik communists of the 1920s (Anton Pannekoek, Sylvia Pankhurst, Otto Rühle etc.);

- the clarity that emerged in France in the 1960s, where Socialisme ou Barbarie tried to understand the changed conditions of modern capitalism, and where the Situationist International and Vieille Taupe took the further step of defining revolution as something encompassing all aspects of our lives;

- and some of the autonomists in Italy in the late 1970s, who uncompromisingly reasserted proletarian autonomy outside of parties and unions" (5).

Nevertheless, TRM was not interested in being the uncritical caretakers of any tradition: "it would be a mistake to see the communist movement as being the exclusive property of this or that current. In fact the radical ideas of one period, fossilized into ideologies, often have to be cast aside along with the organizations that embody them by new movements that arise" (6).

Since those involved with TRM did not see themselves as a political organisation, the point of producing a newsletter was not to recruit people or to push a particular line in competition with others in the marketplace of radical ideas. The aims were quite different:

"In the pages of 'The Red Menace' (and of course within the struggles we are personally involved in) we want to contribute to this communist movement by encouraging such things as the co-ordination of different struggles and the self-organisation of our class outside of the control of unions and political parties (including the so-called 'revolutionary' parties).

We are not the only people with such a perspective, and in producing 'The Red Menace' we hope to increase communication, discussion, the spread of information and generally stimulate joint activity between all those genuinely fighting against this world" (7).

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“Our aim is to produce a regular newsletter covering the class struggle throughout the world.

We hope to produce it every month (although every couple of months might be more realistic). Its format is usually a single 4 page sheet. It will generally include 3 or 4 articles covering events in as much depth as is possible in such short space. Where possible, we shall get first hand accounts of events, and we hope to get a growing number of correspondents.

We are also anxious to include regular reviews of pamphlets, books, etc. so that people know where to find matters dealt with in greater depth. We also feel that it is important that it is freely available” (8).

Production and distribution

The above might suggest that there was some carefully thought out plan behind The Red Menace, when in fact it was a simple matter of a small group of individuals with similar (but by no means identical) political views having something to say and the means to say it.

Most of the Red Menace was written by a core of four people, although others contributed material for articles and helped with distribution. Those involved with TRM had experience of involvement in a range of different groupings within the communist and anarchist milieus including Wildcat, Class War, Intercomm, local anarchist scenes etc. Most of this experience was from in and around London, although one collective member was from an Iranian background.

Access to (then new) desk top publishing equipment and low-cost printing was made possible because one of those involved was a printer at a workers co-op in south London. It is a sign of the times that not only has the once council-funded project disappeared but the building that houses it has been demolished.

Five issues were published, as well as a number of other texts, all of which were distributed free of charge. 500 copies were printed of the first issue, and this was progressively extended to 1500. The newsletter was distributed at demonstrations and meetings, through radical bookshops and by post, including a substantial international mailout.

Groups exchanging publications and correspondence within the UK included Subversion (Manchester), Wildcat (London), Attack International, Thames Valley Class Struggle Group, Counter Information (free newsheet based in Scotland), Autonome (London radical listings free sheet) and individuals belonging to Class War and the Anarchist Communist Federation.

Internationally they included Collide-o-scope (USA), Against Sleep and Nightmare (USA), the Wolf Report (USA), Demolition Derby (Canada), Odio al Capitalismo (Spain), La Estiba (autonomous dockers paper, Spain), Warsaw Anarchist Editors (Poland), Collegemanti Wobbly (Italy), Le Brise Glace (France), Echanges et Mouvement, Interrogations pour la Communaute Humaine (France), Motiva Forlag, Brand (Sweden), and others. There was also correspondence with individuals in Nigeria, the US prison system and elsewhere.

Aside from the newsletter, other activities included participating in a conference hosted by Subversion in Manchester in July 1989 on 'The Importance of Bureaucracy and the Market for Capitalism and its Enemies', for which a member of the Red Menace collective wrote two papers on class struggle and capitalism in the USSR. In February 1990, The Red Menace took part in a 'class struggle anarchist' conference at the Mutual Aid Centre in Liverpool on printing, publishing and distribution.

Of course, those involved with TRM were also active, singly and collectively, in a range of struggles in this period, including the anti-poll tax movement and strikes by local government workers and health workers. During the ambulance workers dispute two popular posters were produced which were widely copied and flyposted across the country. Such initiatives were not, however, undertaken in the name of the Red Menace, since as always the aim was to

practically contribute to the extension of class struggle rather than to promote a radical 'brand name'.

Assessment

The Red Menace was a brief and relatively modest contribution to the communist movement.

The contents are being made available on the internet ten years later because the articles contain useful information on struggles in Britain and internationally in this period, and show how one small group critically responded in what proved to be the last days of Thatcher (if not Thatcherism) and the Soviet Union.

Looking back there were some features of The Red Menace that distinguished it from the efforts of some others with similar political perspectives at the time (and at other times).

Despite the limitations of space, TRM managed to cover a broad range of struggles and other social developments. The communist movement and its enemies were seen to be at work not just in factories and other workplaces but in prisons, housing, the education system and in disputes over religion.

The Red Menace's serious commitment to internationalism was also a notable feature:

“We are conscious that in one of the international centres of capitalist accumulation we have access to resources which are simply unavailable in most parts of the world. We feel it is important to make sure that the resources here are diverted from the perpetuation of capitalist misery towards its overthrow”.

"We feel that the prospect of a world human community is not a utopia to be achieved 'after the revolution', but a practice that is already underway. On the one hand, the increasing development of the international market is extending the tyranny of capital, on the other - we must respond to this by developing autonomous means of communication”.

“Often 'internationalism' has been little more than getting in contact with other Europeans -

merely echoing capital's unification of Western Europe. We feel it is necessary to go beyond this” (9). To this end, TRM covered events in Jamaica, Algeria and Venezuela as well as in Europe and the USA.

In addition to corresponding with a wide range of groups and individuals throughout the world (see above), some materials were translated into French and Russian, the latter being circulated within the USSR.

The end and subsequent activity

The Red Menace came to a natural end in 1990 as energies were channeled elsewhere by the class struggle. The anti-poll tax movement had grown in size and militancy beyond anything previously envisaged, culminating in the Trafalgar Square poll tax riot in London on 31

March 1990. One member of the collective was charged with a serious offence during the riot (and later sensationally acquitted), while others put a lot of work into solidarity with those arrested and imprisoned.

In the ten years since, all of those involved have continued to write and publish (separately) material informed by a communist perspective, although all have moved further away from any 'left communist' orthodoxy to explore a range of interests including music, film, psychogeography, space exploration and ancient monuments... but that is another story, or rather a whole lot of stories...

Notes:

(1) Prior to this the name Red Menace had been used for a couple of occasional leaflets such as 'Anarchism Exposed'. There was no connection with the libertarian communist journal Red Menace published in Canada.

(2) Review: Non-market socialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (3) The struggle against Islamic Fascism begins with the struggle against Iranian Bolshevism (4) From a TRM letter to contacts.

(5) Address to revolutionaries in the USSR

(6) From a TRM discussion document.

(7) New Readers Start Here

(8) From a TRM letter to contacts.

(9) From a TRM letter to contacts.